

Venezuela: U.S. Recognizes Interim Government

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Many in Congress are closely following events in Venezuela, given recent political developments that have led the United States and other governments to recognize an interim government. On January 23, 2019, amid widespread protests against the authoritarian government of President Nicolás Maduro, the president of Venezuela's democratically elected, opposition-controlled National Assembly, Juan Guaidó, declared himself interim president of Venezuela until new presidential elections are convened. The [United States](#), Canada, and more than 35 other countries have recognized Guaidó as the interim president. The situation remains volatile. Maduro retains control of most of the military, even as domestic protests and international pressure mount against him. The United States has [blocked](#) the Maduro government from accessing revenue from the state oil company and agreed to provide [humanitarian aid](#) at Guaidó's request.

Background

Maduro began a second six-year term as president of Venezuela on January 10, 2019. He won reelection in May 2018 in a contest boycotted by most of the opposition and [deemed illegitimate](#) by much of the international community. An escalating economic and [humanitarian crisis](#) has further undermined his domestic legitimacy. There had been dissent within the military, but Maduro [arrested and reportedly tortured](#) individuals, including military personnel, accused of plotting coups. Maduro faced international isolation, as the United States, key European countries, and 18 other members of the [Organization of American States](#) recognized the National Assembly as Venezuela's only democratic institution.

Interim President Juan Guaidó

Juan Guaidó, a 35-year-old industrial engineer who hails from the Popular Will (VP) party of Leopoldo López (who remains under house arrest), was elected president of the National Assembly on January 5, 2019. Under Guaidó's leadership, the National Assembly has enacted resolutions declaring that President Maduro is no longer the legitimate president, establishing a framework for a transition government, and providing amnesty for any public officials (including military members) who support a transition. On January 11, Guaidó declared himself willing to serve as interim president until presidential elections are held. He called for protests to occur on January 23, 2019, the 61st anniversary of the ouster of dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez. Intelligence police detained and then released Guaidó on January 13, 2019.

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The Maduro-aligned Supreme Court has ruled that the new National Assembly leadership has been acting outside the law and invalidated its declarations. Nevertheless, Guaidó took the oath of office on January 23, 2019, based on an interpretation of [Article 233 of the constitution](#) that regards Maduro as having “usurped” (or abandoned) the presidency after January 10. Rallies for Guaidó have been massive.

Guaidó is seeking to form a transition government, but Maduro controls the military and refuses to step down. Thus far, one [general](#) has supported Guaidó, but it is unclear whether others will. Some [40 deaths](#) and more than 800 detentions have occurred since January 23. The government has [sent police](#) to raid Guaidó’s home, detained [foreign journalists](#), and [censored coverage](#) of Guaidó. Further unrest is likely.

International Reaction

Fourteen Western Hemisphere countries have [recognized the Guaidó](#) government, including Canada, most South American countries (including neighboring Colombia and Brazil), four Central American countries, and three Caribbean nations. The EU [initially](#) gave Maduro a deadline for scheduling elections; it lapsed on February 3. Although Italy blocked unified EU recognition of Guaidó’s government, 24 European countries recognized Guaidó (including France, Spain, and Germany). The EU and some Latin American countries are forming a contact group on Venezuela.

[Russia](#) has backed President Maduro and warned against U.S. intervention in Venezuela. Bolivia, Nicaragua, Turkey, Syria, and Iran also have supported Maduro. China has pledged not to intervene in Venezuela’s domestic affairs, and Mexico and Uruguay have [supported mediation](#).

U.S. Policy

The Trump Administration has sought to increase pressure on the Maduro government and hasten a return to democracy in Venezuela. U.S. pressure has included [targeted sanctions](#) on Venezuelan officials and entities and four executive orders establishing broader economic sanctions. On January 10, 2019, the U.S. State Department [condemned](#) Maduro’s “illegitimate usurpation of power.” On January 22, Vice President Pence issued a [video](#) urging the Venezuelan people to protest the following day in support of Guaidó. President Trump recognized Guaidó as interim president of Venezuela on January 23.

In response to U.S. actions, Maduro [broke diplomatic ties](#) with the United States and initially ordered U.S. diplomats to depart within 72 hours before eventually allowing them to stay for 30 days. Secretary of State Pompeo has stated that the United States will maintain a mission in Caracas to conduct relations with the Guaidó government, but nonessential staff and dependents have evacuated. The State Department has [warned](#) U.S. citizens not to travel to Venezuela.

The Trump Administration has continued high-level communications with Guaidó and his representatives. On January 28, the Administration [imposed sanctions](#) on Venezuela’s state-owned oil company, *Petroleos de Venezuela, S.A.* (PdVSA), to prevent Maduro and his government from benefitting from Venezuela’s oil revenue. The State Department offered \$20 million in [humanitarian assistance](#) to interim President Guaidó; that aid reportedly is [being positioned](#) in border areas for delivery. President Trump also has repeatedly asserted that “[all options are on the table](#)” to address the Venezuela situation, including the use of U.S. military force, although most observers believe that is a remote possibility.

Potential Implications

The rapidly changing situation in Venezuela poses significant challenges for U.S. policymakers. The United States has pledged full support for the Guaidó government, although it is unclear what that support might involve should the situation devolve into violence. If Guaidó consolidates a transition government, Congress may consider the type and appropriate channels through which it could authorize and

appropriate funding for the new government. Support from international financial institutions likely would play a major role in supporting Venezuela's economic recovery. Some observers, including a [former head of the U.S. Southern Command](#), have argued [against](#) policy options that could exacerbate the tense situation on the ground in Venezuela and alienate some U.S. allies. If a political transition does not occur quickly, some observers also caution that the stronger sanctions imposed on PdVSA could exacerbate Venezuela's humanitarian crisis.

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